

SINGER OF HIS PEOPLE: THE UNIFICATION OF TWO PEOPLES IN JOHN

MILTON OSKISON'S *THE SINGING BIRD*

by

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(Under the Direction of Valerie Babb)

ABSTRACT

John Milton Oskison, born on September 1, 1874 in Tahlequah, Indian Territory was a prolific writer of short stories, articles, and novels. His unpublished manuscript *The Singing Bird* is significant because it is an historical novel that details Cherokee removal, both voluntary and forced, from the East. The work offers a view of the frontier that seems to be, in many ways, innovative because, unlike other writers from this period, he does not call for the Americanization of the Cherokees. His vision of the West is that of a place where white and Cherokee characters live side by side, each adopting characteristics of the other culture. Furthermore, the novel undermines contemporary representations of Native Americans and criticizes white settlers as uncivilized. This novel is particularly interesting because of its concern with both white and Cherokee cultures; Oskison does not privilege one over the other, but values each with equal fervor.

INDEX WORDS: John Milton Oskison, Cherokees, Creeks, geographical palimpsest, Native Americans, Trail of Tears, Old Settlers, *The Singing Bird*, representations of Native Americans

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## DEDICATION

Dedicated to my fiancée, Chad Mullikin, whose kindness and patience helped me get through long nights at work; my mother, Lynn Smith, who typed the entire manuscript of *The Singing Bird* and who continues to be my best reader, and my father, George Smith, whose humor kept me laughing; my grandmother, Ruth Moody, who was always awake at three in the morning; Ande Shetler, thank you for helping me stay on schedule; and my four furry guys, Yoda, Gremlin, Leia, and Luke, who patiently meowed behind my office desk until I could take a moment to give them a scratch. Without you all, I do not think I would have completed this thesis with as much sanity. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to Dr. Valerie Babb and Dr. Tim Powell, my mentors at The University of Georgia, who have offered invaluable support and inspiration; to Dr. Doug Anderson, who was gracious enough to read and this thesis and offer advice; and to Dr. Jane Hill, my undergraduate mentor, who I will forever be indebted to for her confidence in me and her support of my work.

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## EPIGRAPH

*When the female becomes a singing bird, the nest remains empty and cock redbirds fight among themselves.*

—Cherokee legend in John Milton Oskison's *The Singing Bird*

*On those daylong rides, especially in the afternoons when hunger stimulated the imagination, I began recalling some of the characters in the fiction I had read, and the sort of detail used by the writers I liked best. Gradually it dawned on me that many of the characters in my favorite stories were remarkably like real people. From that thought I progressed to another, Why wouldn't the folks of our neighborhood make interesting characters in stories?*

—John Milton Oskison's reflection of Summer 1893 in *A Tale of the Old I.T.*, an unpublished autobiography

*"[My father] is not William Swan, as the white people call him, but Yah-nu-gun-yah-ski, 'That means Man-who-drowned-a-bear, and the name he earned for himself.'"*

—Catherine Swan to Miss. Eula in *The Singing Bird*

## I. Introduction

One year ago I decided to delve into the life of John Milton Oskison, a Cherokee writer who was born on September 1, 1874 in Tahlequah, the capital of the Cherokee Nation. My interest in Oskison comes partly from my interest in the Cherokee people, for I myself am part Cherokee and spent a good portion of my childhood vacationing on the Cherokee reservation in North Carolina, and partly from my fascination with his unique perspective as a writer who would then have been known as a "mixed blood." Though Oskison was a prolific writer, he is oftentimes remembered for only one short story, "The Problem of Old Harjo"; yet, I found that a great majority of his texts, like this short story, detail the problems faced by Native Americans during the latter part of the 1800s and early 1900s. Oskison does not shy away from the complicated issues during this volatile period in history. His writing as a whole takes on an immense array of subjects: the voluntary and forced removal of the Cherokee from the Southeastern states, the role of women in the Cherokee tribe and in the frontier, the survival of the Cherokee people in a quickly changing social and economic arena, the influence of America's industrial revolution on the tribe, tribal sovereignty, and the education of white Americans about Native American traditions, among other concerns.

Despite the complexity of his work, Oskison has been largely ignored by literary critics. Of those critics who have studied and written articles about his work, there seems to be little agreement about Oskison's worth as an American writer and even less criticism of his importance as a Native American writer. Gretchen Ronnow sees him as

“imperialistic, blood-thirsty, and righteous” and “lacking personal genius” (3);<sup>1</sup> Arney L. Strickland suggests that Oskison is a “reasonably competent stylist” whose work is “quite melodramatic and sentimental . . . and too often reveal[s] even main characters that are stock and stereotyped” (126); while Daniel Littlefield praises his work when he notes that “Even Oskison’s early writing shows a surprising maturity, and there is much in his work to suggest his closeness to literary models” (34). Furthermore, Oskison has been mentioned in numerous articles about the literature of Oklahoma and about different genres in Native American writing. Among the critics of Oskison’s work is Timothy Morris, who groups Oskison with American greats like Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and Henry James (53). Charles Larson, as quoted in Gerald Vizenor, and Randall T.G. Hill, on the other hand, sees Oskison’s work as “conventional in form, traditional in subject, anything but innovative” and as representing the “‘popular romantic’ tradition in Native novels,” respectively (225; 121). The trend when studying

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<sup>1</sup> Ronnow later writes her dissertation on Oskison. In this dissertation titled “John Milton Oskison: Native American Modernist,” Ronnow states that previous critics have focused on Oskison’s “melodrama, sentimentality, stereotypical characters, absence of Indian characters, or lack of interest in Indian issues” (25). She counters these arguments by claiming that Oskison “Westerns” “differ diametrically from the popular Westerns in most of the major aspects” (25). It can be assumed, then, that her thinking about some aspects of Oskison’s writing has come full circle. She attempts to place his writing in the tradition of “Westerns” and argues that Oskison did not seek to romanticize the West. He knew of the hardships that come with life on the prairie because he grew up in Oklahoma. Ronnow also attempts to validate Oskison’s position as a Native American writer, arguing that Oskison presents characters that “could easily and probably be Cherokee, and not just the obviously ‘Indian’ types (11). Her chapter on his essays and articles, however, retains her original line of thinking, which situates Oskison in this historical time period as a capitalist who is concerned with industry and production.

Oskison is to note how his work can be compared to works by Anglo-Americans and to interpret his work as imperialistic; yet, the very title of his unpublished novel, *The Singing Bird*,<sup>2</sup> which is the focus of this paper, seems to demonstrate that Oskison's treatment of Cherokee traditions is more complex and subtle than these interpretations would indicate.

Oskison uses writing and other forms of communication, specifically Sequoyah's syllabary, the Cherokee sacred symbols, and story telling, to create a metaphorical bridge between not only whites and Native Americans but also between individuals within these groups. Both the syllabary and the sacred symbols, the latter of which are indicative of a much older form of writing within the Cherokee community, help to ease the tensions that exist in the novel, tensions that likely reflected those of the historical moment, and therefore become symbolic of the hope for unification between whites and Native Americans. Oskison rewrites accepted versions of historical events to this end. For example, the sense of loss felt by the Cherokees who are either forced or coerced to remove from their land is replaced with a sense of hope in the novel when Sequoyah and Dan, a white missionary, seek the sacred symbols, a quest that further unifies two peoples

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<sup>2</sup> *The Singing Bird* has not, to my knowledge, been analyzed by any other critics. I found this unpublished manuscript in the University of Oklahoma's Western History Archives collection. The manuscript is not dated, so it is impossible to know when he wrote this novel. Oskison was working on his unpublished autobiography when he died in 1947, so it is likely that this novel was written sometime between his short story "The Singing Bird" (1925) and his autobiography. For some reason, he did not publish nearly as many short stories and essays after the year 1925 as he had throughout the course of his life (see fig. 3). Perhaps this is due to the fact that he was working on these two unpublished manuscripts. If this is the case, I estimate that this manuscript was written in the 1930s or early 1940s.

in contestation.<sup>3</sup> James Mooney, author of *Myths of the Cherokee and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees*, verifies that the Delaware did, in fact, steal from the Cherokee "a wooden box, nearly square and wrapped up in a buckskin, in which they kept the most sacred things of their old religion" (397). After these items are stolen, the "old religion was neglected and trouble came to the nation" (397). Yet, according to Mooney, Sequoyah traveled to Mexico alone in 1843 and was not looking for the sacred symbols but for a lost band of the Cherokees. Oskison alters Mooney's historical account of Sequoyah's journey, and in doing so, his novel, like the sacred symbols, symbolizes the unity that can exist between white Americans and American Indians. He frames this historical account of Cherokee traditions, their history and national pride in a way that is readily accessible to a white audience, primarily by creating characters who seemingly reaffirmed readers' beliefs about Native Americans and then problematizing those beliefs. Either his characterizations helped his audience find value in Cherokee culture, or, through the development of the more racist characters, helped the readers see the flaws of such views. Overall, character development effects an understanding of difference. Hence *The Singing Bird* is a symbol of hope for unification.

Oskison's other writing should be reevaluated, for critics, with the exception of Daniel Littlefield, tend to value him not as a writer working between two distinct cultures but as a writer conforming to the conventions used by popular Anglo-American writers. For better or worse, Oskison's audience was, for the most part, white American readers, so it is not surprising that his works, though very involved in political, social, and

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<sup>3</sup>James Mooney, author of *Myths of the Cherokee and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees*, verifies that the Delaware did, in fact, steal from the Cherokee "a wooden box, nearly square and wrapped up in a buckskin,

economic issues as they relate to Native Americans, tend to make these issues palatable to white society. In addition to *The Singing Bird*, Oskison's repertoire consists of articles and short stories which seek to inform a white audience of the political wrongs committed against Native Americans, in particular those committed against the Cherokees during removal, as well as the social structure of the Cherokees. Through his description of their interaction with whites and with each other and through his detailing of the economic condition of all Native Americans living in this period of American history, he argues that, in order for Native Americans to survive during the Industrial Revolution, they will need to learn to compete with whites, a theme that he comes back to in *The Singing Bird*.

If his work feels more Anglo than we expect, then we must consider his motivations for producing such a work.<sup>4</sup> Oskison would have known that in order to thrive in the popular market, he would have to adhere to what was expected of any writer: a conventional novel that would appeal to a dominant white culture. As a result, Oskison's primary focus may be the treatment of Native American cultures, but his characters are oftentimes whites or mixed bloods. *The Singing Bird*, as one example of his work, yields Oskison's primary goal as a writer: to simultaneously encourage an understanding of Native Americans among whites and to support Native American pride. This novel is one of the first fictional works to deconstruct images of Native Americans and standard representations of cross-cultural interactions, a goal that seems both mature and sophisticated by any standard. It is this characteristic of *The Singing Bird* that is

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in which they kept the most sacred things of their old religion" (397).

most intriguing, for he presents an alternate history of the Cherokee people which subtly indoctrinates his audience into their language, their beliefs, their struggles, and their joy, while simultaneously revising received versions of the frontier and offering new ways of understanding Native/white relations.

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<sup>4</sup> I am not arguing that this is the case. I find *The Singing Bird* to be highly concerned with Native American culture. I make this point in response to a number of critics. See Ronnow, Strickland, and Hill.

## II. Talking Leaves: *The Singing Bird* as an Historical Novel

*The Singing Bird* is first and foremost an historical novel which complicates the tension that existed in both the white and Cherokee communities between 1817 and 1861. The novel's primary characters are Dan, a white missionary who is in charge of the numerous stations that are established to help the Cherokees adjust to their new homes in present day Arkansas and Oklahoma and who is sympathetic and receptive to Cherokee culture, and his Cherokee counterpart Sequoyah, who is amenable to adapting elements of white culture. The female counterpart of these men is Miss Eula, a white missionary who learns the Cherokee language and lives more than half of her life among the tribe. On the other side of the spectrum are characters representing the difficulty in bridging the racial divide. Ellen, Dan's white wife, resents the fact that she must be a missionary's wife and live among the "savages," a response that causes her to abandon Dan and his work and ultimately causes Dan to lose his position as missionary head. Ellen's inability to appreciate tribal culture is mirrored by the Cherokee character Ta-ka-to-ka, who initially wants to fight to keep the white intruders out of the Arkansas land he and his people inhabit. Oskison does not merely present a myriad of characters, he attempts to resolve some of the tension that exists between and within the two groups. For example, Dan and Sequoyah search for the Cherokee sacred symbols, a symbolic journey that represents how the two cultures can be mutually beneficial to each other. Further, both Ellen and Ta-ka-to-ka have a change of heart by the conclusion of the novel; each character comes to enjoy the companionship they find among those very people that they so harshly opposed earlier. In addition to these characters, Oskison portrays several characters who lie somewhere in the middle of this binary. Paul, the narrator who is Dan's nephew and a

missionary, views the Native Americans as outsiders but is curious about their culture. Once Dan is accepted as a member of the tribe, Paul becomes more invested in tribal politics, too. All of these characters, taken together, represent the complexity of thought occurring during the early to middle 1800s in America.

Before offering a literary analysis, I would like to situate this novel within the historical removal of the Cherokee people, for Oskison seems consciously to focus on the loss felt by the Cherokee because of their removal and on the political events that affect the perception that his readership likely had about Native Americans. Though only a few dates are mentioned, Oskison structures this rather complex historical novel around important moments that changed the face of Cherokee existence, thereby lending a vivid description to what is too often relayed in the technical language of treaties and other governmental documents that reveal a rather bleak history of the white/Native American relationship. The first Cherokee removal was actually a voluntary one occurring in 1721. The Cherokees, finding that their resistance was going unnoticed, grew frustrated with whites, and some decided to embark on a journey West. After reaching the Mississippi, they were not heard from again until "a small band of hunters," more Cherokees who grew discontented as whites encroached on the land, "crossed the Mississippi to learn what might be beyond" (Mooney 392).<sup>5</sup> They found at the foot of the Rockies a Cherokee tribe "speaking the old Cherokee language and living still as the Cherokee had lived before they had ever known the white man or his ways" (Mooney 392). After this, yet another group of Cherokees decided to head West in 1817 after signing a treaty. This

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<sup>5</sup> James Mooney's *Myths of the Cherokee and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* is one of the earlier attempts to understand Native American cultures and gives depth to traditional historical accounts.

group, which settled in present day Arkansas, became known as the Old Settlers. The non-aggressive resistance to white intruders did not extend into the 1800s, for during this period the Cherokee felt the need to fight for their land. Despite the fact that the Cherokees won the rights to the land within the American court system, the tribe was forced to move West to Indian Territory, present day Oklahoma, in 1838, an event that became known as The Trail of Tears.

Throughout their complicated and difficult history, the Cherokee people have been helped by various mission stations. Missionaries lived among the Cherokees from a very early period. Though it would be impossible to detail here all of the missionary activity among the Native Americans, it is important to note that the first missionary station, established by the Moravians in 1734, and its treatment of and by the Cherokees is indicative of Cherokee acceptance of change. The first Cherokee conversion to Christianity occurred in the Moravian mission in 1773 (Mooney 83). In 1752, this same group established a station in North Carolina, and forty-seven years later built a school at the insistence of the Cherokees who resided in the region. Though the Cherokees did not desire "new theologies," they did want someone to educate their children in the ways of white American culture (Mooney 84). Cherokee response to these missionaries was split, but ultimately the tribal leaders felt that the education offered by missionary workers was invaluable to their survival. Some of the Cherokees felt it important to learn to adapt to their changing environment; therefore, the relationship between the missionaries and the Cherokees was oftentimes peaceful and mutually beneficial. In fact, the relationship that developed between the missionaries and the Cherokees did not cease when the Cherokees were made to move West, for the missionaries moved with them to help them adjust to

their new environment. Through the juxtaposition of actual historical events and people and fictional characters, Oskison produces vignettes which are powerful because they bring this history to life and because they demonstrate the close relationship that exists between the Cherokees and the missionaries. Many of the events he refers to would likely have been obscure to his readers, so this novel in many ways teaches a version of history that is too often left out of traditional history books. Indeed, *The Singing Bird* may be the first Native American novel to tell the historical events of the Cherokee through the lens of a Cherokee, in this case a writer whose mother was full blood and whose father was white.

The fates of the Cherokee people and of the missionary group are inextricably joined in the novel. Before the group (Dan, Ellen, Miss Eula, and Paul) embarks for the west, they spend some time at Kingslake, one of the first missionary stations, which is situated near the Tennessee/Georgia border. It is here that they learn the skills they will need to run their own station in Arkansas, and it is here that they are first exposed to the Cherokee culture. At Kingslake, Miss Eula learns to speak Cherokee and befriends Catherine Swan, a dying Cherokee who is later carried on a litter to the Tennessee River by Jared, a white settler, Roy Bascom, a half Cherokee local, and Henry Falling, another local who is half Cherokee. The group proceeds West, a journey that proves tedious and difficult, a trip that the Cherokees later must travel. On their way, the men separate from the women, who remain at the homes of various white and Cherokee settlers. Paul and Dan find themselves lost and sick in the woods and seek refuge in a Cherokee camp, where they meet Da-tsi-da-hi, known to the missionaries as The Runner, and later Ta-ka-to-ka, also known as Stand Watie, brother to the famous editor of *The Cherokee Phoenix*,

Elias Boudinot.<sup>6</sup> After their long journey, the group begins their missionary work by establishing Hebron Creek, a "station among the Cherokees who were living in Arkansas Territory," and then later assisting those who are forced to move to Indian Territory from Arkansas by establishing Oak Hill (1).<sup>7</sup>

Oak Hill also becomes a refuge for those Natives who have been forced to move West via the Trail of Tears. Oskison does not shy away from the difficult journey placed on the Natives who walked long paths during removal. To grasp the scene they encounter, I feel it best to quote the entire description offered by Paul. This passage does not describe the Trail of Tears but the journey of the Arkansas Cherokees to Indian Territory, a much shorter journey of only a few days travel:

Along the way we had abundant evidence, other than the nearly impassable road, that we followed a trail of sorrow: a path broken through stiff dead weeds to a shallow grave beside a stream now ice-bound but promising to some Cherokee mother who chose the spot for the burial of her child friendly springtime chatter, flowers, and summer warmth; stacks of household goods, a stove, an extra kettle, a cedar chest packed with

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<sup>6</sup> I have recently come across this name in James Mooney's *Myths of the Cherokee and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees*. Mooney has reason to believe that Ta-ka-to-ka is derived from the name of the man known as Degataga, who is better known as Stand Watie, brother of Galagina Watie, also known as Buck or Elias Boudinot.

<sup>7</sup> Though Oskison never clarifies where exactly "Indian Territory" is, I assume here that he refers to Oklahoma. There is currently a band of Western Cherokees who have been living in Arkansas since before Columbus's arrival. The Cherokees that Oskison writes about seem to be those who are adjusting to new environs, therefore, we can assume that these Cherokees are the ones who accept voluntary removal.

treasured dishes abandoned at a stream crossing where gaunt ponies could no longer pull over-loaded wagons up steep and muddy banks; dead and dying horses and mules, bones of calves slaughtered and eaten when they could no longer stagger at the heels of their mothers, and bodies of dogs that lay like ghastly deflated toys cast aside by children, and hungry domestic cats that had taken to the woods after being thrown out of wagons that must be lightened of the last possible superfluous ounce of weight.

We saw where women had hacked crude mortars in logs in which to pound corn for cooking. Once Miss Eula said, " I have looked to see if I could find one wasted grain, but haven't. What hunger they must have suffered! (81)

This journey mirrors the one that the missionaries must undergo on their way to Arkansas, thus demonstrating that in Oskison's frontier the hardships that come as a result of governmental policy are a concern of both groups of people. Though the Cherokees must also deal with a sense of isolation and injustice, their plight is felt by the missionaries who understand the difficulties first hand.

At each station, the missionaries teach Cherokee students to read, write, and farm, and to perform other tasks associated with agricultural life. One of their best scholars, Tlun-tuski, also known as Richard Panther, brother to The Runner, is such a good student that he is sent away to New York to learn to operate a printing press, which the missionaries eventually purchase. While in New York, Richard falls in love with and eventually marries Catherine Decker. In fact, Oskison imagines a marriage similar to the

historical marriage of Elias Boudinot and Harriet Gold, who met at the American Board School in Cornwall. They later fall in love and, upon announcing their desire to marry, stir the town of Cornwall to such fervor that an effigy of Gold is burned in the town square and The American Board School is closed. Oskison rewrites this historical event into his novel when he explores the conflicts that surround the relationship that forms between Catherine and Richard Panther, for their fictional relationship causes such a controversy that effigies of the two are burned.

By the time the two return to live with the missionary group, which accepts their decision to marry, the Old Settlers, the Cherokee who left the East voluntarily, have been forced to move out of Arkansas, and the missionaries go to Oak Hill. About the same time as the removal from Arkansas, Ellen leaves Dan for the first time. She later separates from him entirely, during which time she associates with Sam Houston, Talley Tassel, and Washington Irving, to name a few. The Mission Board decides that, if Dan cannot keep his wife from being an adulterer, then he is not fit to be the station head at Oak Hill. After Ellen leaves him, Dan finds that he can not depend on support from the Mission Board, but he can depend on the Cherokee people to understand his situation. Oskison juxtaposes Ellen's betrayal of Dan and his missionary work with the Cherokee proverb that gives the novel its title, the story of the singing bird. In the words of The Blanket, a Cherokee man who befriends Dan in Arkansas, the singing bird is "'a faithless wife, one who does not bear children . . . . She sits in an empty nest, and her singing and preening cause the male birds to fight over her'" (71). This Cherokee legend is told to Dan at the precise moment that Ellen deserts him for the first time. Dan needs to be consoled, and The Blanket's words do just that. Dan, if he is able to read The Blanket's

coded message, will likely understand that Ellen will cause his demise and, more importantly, that Dan's position in the Cherokee tribe will not be diminished because of Ellen's disavowal. Oskison uses this Cherokee legend as a way to heal the ill feelings resulting from the Dan and Ellen's separation and to establish a connection between Dan and The Blanket. The novel's title becomes then a signifier not only of the love story between Ellen and Dan but also of the Cherokee legend which bridges the white and Cherokee cultures. Dan's involvement with the Cherokee nation increases; the mission purchases Richard Panther's printing press; and their scholars grow in number.

While at Oak Hill, Dan witnesses the assassination of Elias Boudinot, the editor of *The Cherokee Phoenix* who is murdered because he signed the Treaty of New Echota. Though Dan recognizes the assailants, he decides to keep quiet about the murders because he believes that the decision was made by the Cherokees and any repercussions that may occur, and he predicts there will be many, would have been considered by the council. Around this same time, Dan becomes acquainted with Sequoyah and, after being dismissed by the mission board because of Ellen's desertion, journeys with him to Mexico. By the novel's end, Dan has not returned; the Civil War has begun; Ellen, who has a change of heart, returns to Oak Hill and dies; Eula and Paul are married and have a son; and Richard and Catherine have two children.

Oskison's work is deeply informed by actual events, and as he fleshes out the plot, history unfolds. The novel recreates scenes of removal and offers an interior view silenced in formal annals. The novel opens at Kingslake missionary station, located in Tennessee near the Georgia border. Though the date is not explicitly stated, the reference to the voluntary removal is clear. The Old Settlers, those who participated in this

removal, arrived in Arkansas in 1817, and the novel, which opens approximately 3 years after this removal, begins in the year 1820. The setting is almost exactly the location where the Trail of Tears begins (see figure 4). Oskison paints a picture of the Old Settlers as a faction of the tribe who have accepted a fate which pulls them away from their homelands despite the fact that there is "little really good farm land in the area the Arkansas Cherokees occupy, white land seekers have seen to that"; yet, these migrants find that the land in Arkansas is similar to the land in Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina because, as Dan notes, "in their way the hills and dales of Hebron are an Eden" (57). This is not to say that, however satisfied they may feel with the likeness of Arkansas land to that of their land in the East, they are entirely content, for they can find no peace between their fights with the Osage and with the white intruders. The contention between the Cherokee and Osage stems from the United States government assigning the Cherokees land that was, at least in part, already inhabited by the Osages. John Jolly, the principal chief of the Western Cherokee band, explains in *The Singing Bird* that

White men wanted Osage lands 'way up north, so the men at Washin'ton tell them to move south to Missouri an' Arkansas an' make treaty with them that say they can stay in these new place forever. Forever mean twenty year! Then Washin'ton set aside part of Osage lands in Arkansas for Cherokees if they will come west out of Georgia an' Tennessee, but Washin'ton make no new treaty with Osages an' don' tell Cherokees they have no right to Osage lands. Four thousand of us have come here, an' Osages say we mus' get out. So we mus' fight for our homes an' stock and fields. (45)

The Cherokee removal to Arkansas territory leads to conflict with the Osage and serves as an example of Oskison's attention to the hardships faced by the tribe because of dislocation.

The sense of loss experienced by the Cherokees is illustrated through Oskison's depiction of the missionaries' attempt to aid in the healing that must occur before the whites and the Cherokees can coexist peacefully. Dan, who earns the name the Straight Talker, is invited by the Cherokees to attend a meeting of the Ki-tuh-wahs, a secret society made up of fullbloods. While there, he and Paul, who has been sworn to secrecy but nevertheless reveals the conversation during the narration of the novel, learn that the Conservatives are not, as Paul imagined, "old men who yearned to go back to the life of the hunter" (66). Some were young full-bloods who desired action; they resent the fact that whites have intruded on their land time and time again and want to stop the steady stream of whites into the land they now inhabit. The Conservatives are willing to fight to keep "white thieves," "white ruffians who violated their women," "white whiskey runner[s]," and "every brazen intruder" from their lands (66).<sup>8</sup> In this council there are some, like Ta-ka-to-ka, who oppose such strong action. This sect believes that if there were an uprising among the Cherokees, the Arkansas militia could "[raid] and [burn], and [force] the Cherokees to leave their fields and cabins and mills and shops and go further west" (65-66). By placing his characters in the midst of this political struggle between the Conservatives and the passive party of Cherokees who believe fighting will only

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<sup>8</sup> The Conservatives are depicted in such a way that their desire to go to war seems justified. To emphasize the gravity of this meeting, this scene is immediately followed with Ellen's flippant request to travel to Fort Gibson to meet with Kate Buell, a settler at Fort Gibson. In the face of the struggles of the Cherokee nation, Ellen, the New Yorker, concerns herself with entertaining and coquetry.

bring more strife to their people, Oskison provides some internal insight into the complexity and tensions among the Cherokee. He perpetually adheres to historical events while offering a personal, and imagined, narrative of possible thoughts and feelings historical figures likely struggled with.

Ultimately the decision of the council is moot, for less than two months after the Ki-tuh-wah meeting, the Cherokees are told to leave Arkansas. Though the novel does not explain why the Cherokees are made to leave, Oskison does hint that Sequoyah is in Washington acting as a representative of the Cherokee people. Sequoyah and six other Cherokees actually did plead with the government for their rights to the land, but on May 6, 1827 they were forced to sign a treaty which relocated their band of the Cherokees to Arkansas.<sup>9</sup> Again, the action in *The Singing Bird* hinges on historical events. By presenting the angry and down-trodden responses of his white and Native American characters to this decision, Oskison encourages his reader to become informed about political action taken against the Cherokees. Though the May 6, 1827 treaty party signed the document which forces the band's removal, they only do this as a last resort in response to the encroachment of white settlers and in response to the growing tension between the two parties of thinking within the Cherokee community.

This removal of the Old settlers to Indian Territory later known as the area near the present Cherokee capitol of Tahlequah, Oklahoma in 1828 marks another important phase in the development of the novel. The land they have come to see as a refuge from

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<sup>9</sup> Sequoyah signed this treaty using the name of George Guess. Interestingly enough, Dr. Tim Powell has recently informed me that some of the Eastern band of the Cherokees today think that George Guess is an imposter. They believe that Sequoyah was actually abducted and replaced by another man, George Guess.

encroachment is, once again, taken away from them. Before the Cherokees can move their possessions to Indian Territory, the presence of white settlers is already felt. In the text, Paul Wear, relates the story of Martha Bird, a Cherokee widow who single-handedly provides for her nine children. She has been very successful in Arkansas; she has "two cabins, thirteen acres of rich bottom land 'fenced and tilled,' a good stable, six milch cows and twelve young neat cattle, and such house furnishings and farm tools as chairs, pots, cedar buckets, plows, trace chains, saws, drawing knives, and clothing." A majority of these movable items are "taken from her forcibly by the white intruder who came to appropriate her home before she got out." Her livestock is driven away and the men she sends to recover her cattle are "threatened with death unless they give up the search." The United States government, which swears in numerous documents to treat the Cherokees and other Native Americans as a father would a child, does not intervene to help the Arkansas Cherokees.<sup>10</sup> In fact, their offer of "one hundred and fifty dollars" to Bird, and their refusal to acknowledge her claim for five hundred dollars more, seem more insulting than just (75).

The missionaries wait until the last family has left Hebron Creek before they, too, traverse the same stretch of land as those who went before them. Oskison paints a vivid

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<sup>10</sup> I am thinking specifically of the language of the various treaties. For example, in a letter from Creek council members to the United States commissioners, the Creeks refer to the President as "our Father the President of the United States." It would be interesting to trace this phrase in written texts to discover whether the United States government and its officials began this trend or if the indigenous peoples coined the President as such. Oskison speculates in *The Singing Bird* that the U.S. government has sought to divide the Cherokee nation by instituting controversial policies. If this is found to be the case, it is not a far stretch of the imagination to see the use of "our Father the President" as a deceitful rhetorical device.

description of the trail they follow and details the hardship they faced by noting the objects, and the burial sites, they leave behind. Once in Indian Territory, the Cherokees find that the land there is remarkably different from the land in Arkansas, which was plowable. In his new home at Oak Hill, Paul relates how the missionaries and the Cherokees fight the plow in order to sow their first crop. With Dan "prodding and gee-ing and haw-ing" while Paul fights "grimly to keep the plowshare at the right depth, three to four inches," the two are still ill equipped to probe the "roots that were veritable devil's shoe-strings" (92-93). It is only through a cooperative effort that the Cherokees and the missionaries are finally able to farm. Jim Redbird teaches the missionaries how to construct fences and to lay the bottom rail "in the light of the moon" to prevent it from rotting while Dan teaches the Cherokees to adjust their plow to "prevent the share from plunging too deeply into the earth." It is as if the land itself pulls the two peoples closer together and allows them to eventually form a New England-Cherokee family, a point I will return to in section II.

Again in a segment that fuses the novel's plot with actual history, the relative peace found at Oak Hill is disrupted with the 1832 Worcester vs. Georgia ruling. The Supreme Court grants the Eastern Cherokees tribal sovereignty, but Andrew Jackson refuses to enforce the court's decision, probably because gold is found in Georgia on Cherokee lands in 1828. This already tense condition peaks when, in 1835, some seventy Cherokees sign the Treaty of New Echota, which releases Cherokee land in the Southeast in exchange for land in Indian Territory. In the novel, Dan and Paul learn from Crowheart, a Cherokee who has recently moved to a location near Oak Hill, that the situation in Georgia was hostile, for "Georgia had been putting increasing pressure on the

Federal Government to remove the Indians from the state. At last Georgia's land-hungry whites had put into office a Governor, George R. Gilmer, who dared to tell Jackson and the Congress of the United States that if the Federal Government did not expel the Cherokees the Georgia militia would" (139). Oskison defends the Cherokee treaty signers and criticizes the Treaty, saying that the

first few hundreds who came were the families of the three score and ten signers of the farcical treaty negotiated by President Jackson's agents. Although a two years' grace had been written into that spurious agreement, in which time all Eastern Cherokees were required to remove, the Indian signers had come at once lest the others whom they had betrayed should invoke against them a tribal law which made alienation of Cherokee land treason punishable by death.

By the time they reached Indian Territory, these Treaty Party exiles had ample cause for bitterness against the Government. They had not been paid for their abandoned homes and possessions. They had found that the responsibility for conducting them to their new homeland had been entrusted to contractors who had proved incompetent and venal, willing to sell the lives of a band of emigrants for a share of the food contractors' thieving. (138-39)

Approximately one to two years after the treaty signers arrive at Oak Hill, their tribesmen and women who felt betrayed by their action begin arriving in Indian Territory during the forced migration of some sixteen thousand Cherokees who walk the famous *Nunna daul Tsuny*, Cherokee for "The Trail Where They Cried," more commonly known as The Trail of Tears. As with the Arkansas Removal, the Southeastern tribes faced great hardship, and in his novel, Oskison lets the children who walked Nunna daul Tsuny tell the story.

Again, Oskison allows his readership to experience the unjust treatment through an imaginative Native American lens rather than through a white narration of the event. One of the young Cherokees remembers "Way back yonder, they took us off of a boat and put us on the railroad cars for a while. We got scared when the cars started. My uncle's hat blowed off, and he jumped off to get it back and the cars hit him and mashed him. But they did not stop to see if he was dead" (142). Oskison's allowing the children to tell what they experienced on the Trail of Tears, enables him to create a scene demonstrating yet another instance of cross-racial healing. Miss Eula, who listens to the children's stories, allows a space for the children to discuss what they experienced, and therefore aids in the healing process. Thus in Oskison's vision, the Cherokee are regenerated through their interaction with the white missionaries.

In history and in the novel, the period after Removal was very difficult for the Eastern and Western bands of Cherokees because the Cherokee family becomes, according to Oskison, "a house divided against itself" (159). The Cherokee nation is split into two groups: the Easterners, who resent the fact that they have been forced to move West and who do not want to live according to the laws of the Western Cherokees, and the Westerners, who are reluctant to change their laws to accommodate the newcomers. The Eastern band members seek to revenge the deaths of the Treaty signers, especially the death of Elias Boudinot, who, though not a chief, was a powerful leader of the Eastern band. Later, the tribe is divided into those who support John Ross, who was elected chief of the Eastern band in 1827, and those who do not. Historical accounts of this do not usually detail the violence and murder among the Eastern and Western bands of the Cherokees, which resulted from removal. It is during this period that Elias

Boudinot, editor of *The Cherokee Phoenix*, Major Ridge, a prominent Cherokee citizen, and his son, John Ridge, travel West after signing the Treaty of New Echota and are murdered near the present day capital of Tahlequah.

Oskison offers an alternate history because he argues, through his characters, that the division of the tribe is not attributed to any action or inaction on the part of the Cherokees; instead, the desire to divide the tribe comes from the United States government, which as early as 1803, as Dan notes, has "striven to create factions in the tribes favorable to removal. They petted those who yielded to removal propaganda, and promised them fat rewards - which were seldom paid" (160). Dan concludes his thought by noting that the Cherokees could "Unite and grow strong" were it not for the Government, whose "policy is to divide and destroy." Again, Oskison offers a subversive view of historical events. The notion that the United States government actually worked to divide the tribal nations is a point often overlooked in the traditional history books. Oskison seems to be consciously questioning the validity of a history which is told from only one perspective, that of white mainstream culture.

The tensions that arise because of both the voluntary and forced removal are alleviated when Dan and Sequoyah travel to Mexico to seek the Cherokee "sacred symbols," a quest which offers profound hope to the Cherokee people. Dan has been asked to accompany Sequoyah on the journey, and though he has not been told as much, he suspects that Sequoyah is searching for the sacred symbols that the Delawares (Lenapi) stole years before. Ta-ka-e-tuh, Cherokee, reveals to Dan that "when [the sacred symbols] had proved vulnerable the faith of the people was shaken" (50). The sacred symbols represent the continuance of Cherokee religion and customs, and now

that Sequoyah has gone on a quest for these items, the Cherokee people have new found hope. The tribe, as a result, is "well on the way to hold[ing] their own in competition with the whites" (219). Unfortunately, Sequoyah does not return, and it can be assumed that both he and Dan have been murdered by the Lenapi. The quest is not in vain, however, for the mere fact that both a white man and a Cherokee travel to their deaths in search of an item that will aid the Cherokee people is indicative of a change between these two peoples; the future looks hopeful.

The novel concludes during the Civil War, when, as was the case with most of the nation, brother fought against brother. Paul compares the previous struggle between the Eastern and Western bands as a "mere tussle" in comparison to the violence that ensues during this later period. In many ways, the Cherokee experienced a Civil War within the Civil War. Though Oskison does not describe this period in depth, he does demonstrate that the Cherokees are involved in a national battle, which seems to indicate that the Cherokees were hyper-sensitive to political events that were occurring beyond the boundary of the territory where they lived. Throughout the course of the novel, there is a very real distinction between the Cherokee nation and the nation of the United States. Dan tells Paul that the "government at Washington is a government of the people, and the people are hungry for more and more land" (45). Oskison seems to write into contemporary history the notion that the hunger for land acquisition will only bring about the destruction of the whites; once they have access to all Native lands, they will continue to fight amongst themselves for land until "they are destroyed," an apocalyptic vision of the future that Leslie Marmon Silko explores in her *Almanac of the Dead* (46).

Therefore, land acquisition proves to be dangerous not only to those who are

forced to leave their homes but also to those who are consumed by greed and envy.<sup>11</sup> In *The Singing Bird*, Oskison informs his white readership about the struggles Native Americans have had to endure as a means of teaching his white audience how they are related to these struggles. He accomplishes this by allowing previously silenced voices to recreate the Cherokee history on a more intimate level, by tempering the harsh period of Cherokee removal with a mutuality of understanding between whites and indigenous populations, and by demonstrating, through his use of symbolic forms of communication, that a unification between whites and American Indians is possible.

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that despite their forced removal, the Cherokees are able to reestablish peace and order, indicating that they will survive and prosper.

### III. Oskison's Frontier

The historicity of *The Singing Bird* creates the American frontier, an idea central to American self-definition and aptly characterized by Louis Owens as an "always changing zone of multifaceted contact within which every utterance is challenged and interrogated, all referents put into question" (26). Oskison's frontier, indeed, is a zone where any sense of the *other* seems absent.<sup>12</sup> The land can be likened to a painting which is partially erased to make room for yet another painting, which is partially erased to make room for another, and so on. The geographical palimpsest of Oskison's frontier is complicated by the fact that there are so many narratives, each laid beside and within the others. The resulting effect is initially a contestation of voices which are then, Oskison seems to argue, brought into harmony through an understanding relationship that is mutually beneficial.

Oskison's chief vehicle for exploring the significance of the frontier is a metaphoric use of language. Upon leaving Kingslake, their first stopping point, Miss Eula laments her separation from the station, its people, and the land. She can only express her love of the land through the Cherokee language. She wants to go back to Walden's Ridge and say the Cherokee name "O-tullee-ton-tanna-ta-kunna-ee," which translates into "mountains looking at each other," because the language has come to be "more like a spring warbler's song" than a word describing the ridge (5). She appreciates the language, which she learns to speak fluently during her stay at Kingslake, because it seems the only natural way to describe the land around her. It is at this instance in the

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<sup>12</sup> The one exception is Ellen's relationship to the indigenous people she encounters, a point I will return to later in this essay.

novel when her native language will not suffice. She has become so involved in Cherokee ways that separating their language from the land they inhabit seems impossible. Both Miss Eula and the language she loves come to represent the fluidity of Oskison's frontier.

As the missionaries travel from the Georgia/Tennessee border mission at Kingslake to Arkansas via the Natchez Trace, Paul helps to carry Catherine Swan, the dying daughter of William Swan, a Cherokee chief, along an old Creek path. Catherine, too, seems to understand the power of language when she reclaims her father's name for him. She tells Miss. Eula, while at Kingslake, that her father "is not William Swan, as the white people call him, but Yah-nu-gun-yah-ski. That means Man-who-drowned-a-bear, and the name he earned for himself. I love him very much!"<sup>13</sup> (8) The name Yah-nu-gun-yah-ski conveys more information about the man than either William Swan or her own translation, Man-who-drowned-a-bear, because the name signifies her father's past and his accomplishments within the larger tribe. Oskison's frontier, then, consists of the merging of many languages; the power of language, with all of its nuances and connotations, is not lost here, but the independent languages of the tribes are endangered because the whites insist on renaming the people of the tribe, thus robbing them of the name which connects them to their people and to their past.

On this journey, Paul walks through what was at one time Creek and Chickasaw country to the home of Doctor Scott, a slave owner.<sup>13</sup> Oskison's frontier is inhabited by

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<sup>13</sup> Dan later comments on the wrongs committed against slaves by telling Paul that they will, under no circumstances, purchase a black woman to work in the kitchen at the missionary. Later in the novel, Uncle Frank comes to live with them. Uncle Frank is, as best I can tell, a run-away slave who lived among the Cherokees. The narrator, Paul, mentions that Uncle Frank tells his story of creation of the races using "a

people of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Paul comments that he feels "honored" to carry Catherine on the same path that "the Creeks have carried their wounded and sick over" (10). During the journey, Roy Bascom, one of the half-blood Cherokee men helping to take Catherine to Doctor Scott's plantation, grows so discomforted by the journey and by the sickness and possible death of Catherine that he tells Paul about the history of the land "(as though some human sound were needed to break the silence)":

"Over yonder's Chickasaw Old Fields. Long time ago them Indians used there. They're all down Missisip' way now'" (13). Again, the layering of cultures and people seems indicative of change and cultural survival.

The land, then, becomes a geographical palimpsest, a space on which the histories of the people who inhabit, or once inhabited the land intersect and merge, sometimes violently and sometimes peacefully. Since Paul never names the Creek path nor the trail the party follows, the land comes to represent a constant space which remains significant to past and present and significant to many cultures. The land, more specifically the trails, in this novel belong to no one but connect those who pass over it. The land wears the scar of human travel and development over decades and leaves tell-tale signs of each of the people who inhabit it. Paul can read the land in a way which allows him to see the history and the narratives of the Creeks, the Chickasaws, the Cherokees, and ultimately

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curious medley of Cherokee, Georgia English, and gestures": "First to be created were three men, all black. Setting off together to explore the world, they came to a stream tired and dusty. One went into the water, washed himself all over, and came out white. Another, washing himself in the roiled water, came out a reddish hue, and became the father of the Indian race. The third merely dropped his palms and the soles of his feet in the water and except for these muddy-white parts, remained black as the Creator intended all men to be" (96). Oskison's insertion of multiple creation myths reveals the fluidity of his frontier.

Euramericans laid one on top of the other. Through this descriptive technique, Oskison's intended audience can also visualize their connection to the land. The Creek path that Paul follows is likely to have its counterpart underneath the brick pavement of the city streets of New York or Boston. Oskison links land and the stories, for the path and other geographical space marks the history of many interconnected peoples.

Oskison's frontier forges New England and Cherokee heritages together. Always, between the two there are situations of reciprocal benefit. The Cherokees adapt to white culture by learning new methods of farming, writing in both Cherokee and English, while the white characters learn to find value in a Native American culture they once dismissed as "savage." Reciprocally, Dan, who initially wants to teach the Cherokees how to farm, to read, and to write, gradually comes to accept the fact that they have something to teach him, as well. At Hebron Creek, he asserts to Da-tsi-da-hi, The Runner, that the "Cherokees must learn the ways of the whites, and prepare to meet them as equals at their own game" (43). As Craig Womack states in *Red on Red*, "only cultures that are able to adapt to change remain living cultures; otherwise, they become no longer relevant and are abandoned" (42). Oskison encourages adaptation, but begs his white reader to accept elements of Cherokee and other tribal cultures, as well, because, otherwise, they risk becoming culturally stagnant, a condition that prohibits a living culture.

Dan seeks to empower the Cherokees but fails, at this point, to find anything in their culture which could be helpful to him. It is not until Ta-ka-to-ka, a Cherokee War Chief, spits on and crushes beneath his heel the "paper talk" sent via Dan and Paul from the Governor of Arkansas that Dan begins to acknowledge the values of the Cherokee society. To him, Ta-ka-to-ka is "a man" because he has complete and total conviction.

In a later encounter, Ta-ka-to-ka reveals to Dan that he finds Christianity and the actions of the American government illogical. His reasoning incites Dan to praise and he tells Ellen "There's a philosopher worth knowing" (47). To Ellen's comment "I believe you prefer him to your college teachers," Dan replies, "Perhaps," yet another indication that Dan does not preemptively privilege Euramerican values over those of the Cherokees. Dan grows to know the Cherokees more closely. He picks "up from Cherokee speakers certain intonations and mannerisms that brought throaty chuckles: a trick of rubbing one palm quickly across the other, thrusting out his chin, and sometimes putting a period to a sentence with a grunting 'hunh!'" (74). He is invited to attend secret council meetings, and eventually he is Sequoyah's lone companion to Mexico, where he hopes to retrieve the Cherokee sacred symbols. Through Dan's character, Oskison argues, in the early 1900s, a point that cultural critic Craig Womack makes much later in 1999 when he published *Red on Red*: that to presume assimilation occurs only *to* Native Americans is a "supremacist notion" which assumes "assimilation can only go in one direction, that white culture always overpowers Indian culture, that white is inherently more powerful than red, that Indian resistance has never occurred in such a fashion that things European have been radically subverted by Indians" (12). On the complex frontier Oskison creates, Dan and the other white characters, with the possible exception of Ellen, assume characteristics of Cherokee culture, including their lifestyle, language, orality, and ideologies.

The gradual indoctrination of Dan into Cherokee culture culminates with his complete abandonment of his religious work at the mission and with his relationship with Sequoyah. His desire to help the people find their sacred symbols makes the work at the

mission "less important to [him] than it had [been] before he knew Sequoyah" (155). Ultimately, Oskison's novel illustrates how people and cultures fuse. Indeed, the fate of the missionaries and the Cherokees becomes more closely entwined. When they are relocated from the East and from Arkansas, the missionaries, too, must learn to adapt to their new home. Their political involvement with tribal matters becomes increasingly important. Though Dan can not plead for the Cherokees' rights in Washington, D.C., he does attend council meetings and decides, after witnessing Boudinot's murder, that Cherokee law should take precedence over the law of the United States. He has become like a member of "the greater family of the Cherokees" and has access to their secret councils (171). His involvement in tribal affairs seems to be proof that the Cherokees and the whites can have a symbiotic relationship.

Oskison's frontier, then, is a space where boundaries between distinct groups of people "overlap, intersect, collide violently, and occasionally coalesce" (Powell). No where is the permeability of Oskison's frontier more clearly symbolized than in the union of Richard and Catherine. Though not accepted in the East, in the West, where the cultures are constantly changing in order to adapt to the sometimes harsh and unyielding conditions of climate and political and social turmoil, the union is accepted as a natural one and can exist in a frontier which has no contrived boundaries. When the couple arrive on the frontier, they find that Catherine's new family accepts her as a daughter. In a letter to her father, Catherine describes the hospitality which she receives from her "Cherokee mother and father," whom she has come to love as if they "were [her] own" (134). She notes that they are "amiable, considerate, and affectionate in their restrained fashion" (134). Perhaps the cultural integration of Catherine into the home of the

Panthers can best be described through the exchange of recipes that occurs. Catherine prepares rice pudding for her Cherokee family, who enjoy it so much that "Mother has learned how to prepare it" (134). Catherine's grows so excited about conutche, a traditional Cherokee food, that she promises to send the recipe home to her own mother and father. Catherine takes extreme pride in her husband and hopes to have children with "skins like beautiful burnished copper, not the pale unwholesome hue of members of my own family" (87). Catherine and Richard Panther represent another dimension of Oskison's complicated view of the frontier. In his vision of this harsh terrain, the land connects the Cherokees and the whites. Races are not bound by the social conventions of the East; the necessities of survival allow them more freedom and more chances to gain from their exposure to other cultures.

#### IV. "Savages" and "Heathens": Representations of Native Americans

As Oskison attempts to redefine the frontier, he also seeks to deflate some of the most popular misconceptions of Native Americans. It is not uncommon to see Native Americans referred to as "savages" and "heathens" in discourse from this time period. Paul notices that Ellen, who goes West not only to be with her husband but to experience an adventure, finds "neither the savages of her friends' imagining nor the excitement of wilderness adventure, but the orderly routine of a successful mission station conducted in a peaceful setting" (3). The chiefs that they encounter are described as "grave and courteous" men who are "little different save in dress and tint of skin from the burghers of New York." To fully understand the significance of Oskison's redefinition, we must consider the cultural milieu within which he wrote. Though an exhaustive analysis of Native American representations is impossible in a thesis of this length, a brief inquiry into select creations is in order.

An extreme example of such blatant misrepresentation can be seen by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Discourse on Inequality*. Though Rousseau never saw an indigenous person, he imagines what the culture and its people are like when he postulates that the Indian's

imagination paints nothing to him; his heart asks nothing from him. His moderate wants are so easily supplied with what he finds everywhere ready to his hand, and he stands at such a distance from the degree of knowledge requisite to cover more, that he can neither have foresight nor curiosity. The spectacle of nature, by growing quite familiar to him, becomes at last equally indifferent. It is constantly the same order, constantly the same revolutions; he has not sense

enough to feel surprise at the sight of the greatest wonders; and it is not in his mind that we must look for philosophy, which man must have to know how to observe once, what he has every day seen. His soul, which nothing disturbs, gives itself up to the consciousness of its actual existence, without any thought of even the nearest futurity; and his projects, equally confined with his views, scarce extend to the end of the day. (in Bordewich 34-35)

Fergus M. Bordewich, in *Killing the White Man's Indian: Reinventing Native Americans at the End of the Twentieth Century* astutely notes that Rousseau's description of Native Americans "flattened out the multitudinous realities of actual Indian communities, blurring their individuality and trapping them permanently in European fantasy" (34).

Oskison's narrative works to dispel this myth of the Native American by offering Cherokee characters who are informed of their past through creation stories, who have a deep attachment and appreciation for the land that they lost in the East, and who are very concerned with their future in a land being overcome with Euramericans.

Rousseau's is not the only source depicting Native Americans as they existed in European and American imaginations. American propaganda photographs, such as the 1832 broadside "Anti-Indian Sentiment on the Frontier" (Figure 1), were used as far back as the seventeenth century by the Puritans, who believed that God placed Native Americans in the New World to test Christian spirituality and faith. Ultimately, these representations portray indigenous peoples as violent "savages."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Figure 5 for another anti-Native American image.



Fig. 1

The picture, which is "based on the story of the capture of two white women from a frontier settlement," depicts a Native American man with tomahawk raised as if to strike a young, vulnerable white woman. This depiction is made even more emotionally gripping because of the child who throws her hands up to embrace the woman just before she is struck by the tomahawk. The caption reads: "While many of our most populous cities have been visited by that dreadful disease, the Cholera, and to which thousands have fallen victims, the merciless Savages have been as fatally engaged in the work of death on the frontiers; where great numbers (including women and children) have fallen victims to the bloody tomahawk." The picture clearly depicts the representation of the Native American as a savage murderer who threatens the Americans, and thereby endangers the potential prosperity of America.

Native Americans fared little better once removals were complete and popular images began to represent their problematic assimilation into dominant American society. In this time period, roughly 1830 to 1850, the Native American is, in some cases, depicted as a traitor to his people. "A Delegate to the Great White Father," Figure 2, is a painting by George Catlin depicting Wi-Jún-Jon before and after he visited Washington, D.C.



Fig. 2

Catlin, who was very involved in the culture of Native American tribes, depicts Wi-Jún-Jon with his back turned to himself. The portrait represents the past and the future: one looks intently into the distance, holds a peace pipe, and assumes a posture and dress which seems reminiscent of Ellen's description of chiefs as "grave," while his counterpart, the dandified Wi- Jún-Jon, holds an umbrella and what appears to be a lady's fan. The image suggests that this man can either assume a Native American identity or a white identity, but not both. Oskison counters such depictions of Native Americans by

questioning the assignment of the word "savage" to only indigenous peoples and by depicting a complex range of characters who are able to situate themselves within both the Euramerican and the indigenous populations.

Oskison's frontier offers an alternative future for Native Americans. *The Singing Bird* uses language comparing the Chiefs, for example, to the "burghers of New York." Oskison stresses similarities by making his characters not so different in manner from white men. In his language, as well, Oskison seeks to render Native Americans as less "otherly." It is important to note that Ellen and her New York relatives and friends seem to be the only characters in the novel who refer to the Natives as "savages" and "heathens." In fact, Oskison's use of these words is limited, for the most part, to Ellen's voice. In many ways, Ellen cannot seem to extricate herself from a naming process which places Native Americans in the realm of the *other*, but Oskison creates in Ellen a character who cannot adjust to frontier life, and therefore, will never be able to have a complete understanding and appreciation of its host of different types. Thus her language appropriately maintains the space which reinforces perceptions of difference. Yet even Ellen is changed by the frontier to a degree. She comes to appreciate Sequoyah as more than a "crackbrained, untidy old man" when she tells Paul that she believes in Sequoyah because Dan does (104). Her appreciation can never become expansive, can never effect a real transformation because she remains isolated, for she can not appreciate the dynamic exchange that occurs between various groups in the frontier, which is "always unstable, multidirectional, hybridized, characterized by heteroglossia, and indeterminate" (Owens 26). Oskison uses her to represent those who prefer to reside within a space which holds no difference and is predictable; a space far from Native Americans who are

perceived as dangerous and foreign.

While it might be argued that Oskison's use of these terms employs expected connotations, other passages in the novel indicate otherwise. Appropriately enough, the term "savage" is also used to describe Old Hickory, the "awful red-haired white savage" (6). Oskison seems to invert racial preconceptions, and it is in this inversion that we see Oskison evoking modern ideas of cultural relativism. He encourages his reader to see that in the West, at least, the "uncivilized savages" might be the whites who live in filth and debauchery. In one scene, for example, Dan and Paul, while visiting Montgomery's Point, stay at a hotel which has "dirty, lice-infested" rooms and "food reeking of rancid fat" (31). Furthermore, the inn-keeper's son, when asked to describe his grandmother, has been taught to say that she is "A damn ole bitch!" (32). Ultimately, it is Paul who reassigns the name "heathen" when he says, "Like others who had come to the Cherokees from a world troubled by politics, ranting religious hypocrisy, and greed for land, I had thought that the red men lived more sanely than the whites. They had held more firmly to their tried beliefs and customs, had been more diligent in putting first things first. I had thought sometimes Perhaps we are the heathens" (28). Oskison seeks to invert the perception of the Native Americans as savages by allowing his white characters to question the actions of whites juxtaposed with those of the indigenous peoples.

Oskison's novel discounts the fear and erasure of Native Americans reflected so prevalently in material culture by showing Cherokee humanity and the continuation of Cherokee culture. While the plot of the novel seems to focus on the missionaries and their religious views, Oskison allows the indigenous Cherokee voice to be clearly heard. For instance, he weaves Cherokee legend into the structure of the plot by elaborating on

the legend of the Singing Bird. According to legend, the husband of an unfaithful wife had the right, if he chose, to either have her ears and/or nose cut off or to have her exiled from the tribe. It is interesting to note Oskison's labeling of this tradition as a "legend" when in fact it seems to be more of a law.<sup>15</sup> By including this line, he appropriates the traditional law of the Cherokees concerning adulterous women. Where Euramerican sensibilities might view this legend in highly romanticized ways, Oskison's use of this legend provides him with an opportunity to contrast cultural values. Though Oskison's white readers may find this legend foreign, he invites them into the culture of the Cherokees and hopes that they will find value in their beliefs.

When after Ellen's adulterous affair, Cephas Wear, Dan's uncle, comes to Oak Hill to inform him that the Board wants his resignation, the Cherokee people still treat him with respect and sympathy. They know that a husband can not be held responsible for his wife's actions, and they realize that if he chooses to take her back, then he has acted out of kindness and should not be discredited. John Ross, who has worked with Dan at Oak Hill and who has grown to be a friend of Dan, tells the Mission Board that Ellen

is living down her past. We have a saying among the Cherokee, 'When the singing bird molts she is a better wife than ever.' Dan Wear knew it, and he would have taken her back to his fire. We would not have liked or

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<sup>15</sup>Though Oskison names The Blanket's anecdotal story as a "legend." I prefer to see this anecdote as a proverb, a word that does not carry so strong a romantic connotation. I think, however, it is important that Oskison's novel opens with the claim that this anecdote is a "legend," for this connotes from the start a highly romanticized, and familiar, depiction of Native Americans, a depiction debunked through the course of the novel.

trusted him less because of that Christian act. We believe in a God Who can forgive all to one whose heart is cleansed of evil ... If your Board can ride out the storm of criticism in quarters where its only an outcry against outraged morality by those ignorant of the facts, you will be stronger than before amongst the Cherokees by making no further changes at Oak Hill. I would have said the same thing had I been consulted before Dan Wear was dismissed. (228)

Ross' references to Christianity may seem problematic to a reader who expects Native Americans to remain true to their traditional religions, his conversion to Christianity is indicative of the dynamics of the frontier. Though Ross has converted to Christianity, his acceptance of Dan despite the fact that Ellen has cuckolded him seems to stem more from his Cherokee beliefs than from those taught to him by white Christians.

His words evoke the story told by The Blanket, whose wife was also a singing bird. The Blanket, upon discovering his wife's adultery, returns to his own clan, who are unaffected by this separation. The Blanket, Paul observes, "had not lost the confidence of his people, nor his influence for good because he would not martyrize himself by cleaving unto that unworthy woman. I thought, the Cherokees are a reasonable, understanding people" (114). Ross's words sway the Board to reconsider their decision to cease funding of Oak Hill. By juxtaposing the position of the Board to Ross's opinion about Ellen's affair, Oskison questions the values of Euramerica and of his readers. Ross's genuine acceptance undercuts the hypocritical practices of the Christian Mission Board because Ross adheres to his own principals. Ross offers comfort to Dan, a gesture that humanizes the Cherokees. As Paul observes, the West is not inhabited by "heathens."

Depictions of Native Americans often show them in perpetual stasis as they maintain the traditional ways. Oskison complicates this notion by arguing that in order for this culture to survive, it must evolve. The Cherokees in his work do not oppose change; in fact, they are welcome to new ways. As Sequoyah and Dan are discussing Dan's plan to build a printing press at Oak Hill, Sequoyah tells him that, despite the fact that he disagrees with the "preacher's Christ talk," he appreciates what the missionaries are doing. They are teaching the Cherokees how to survive in the encroaching white world by teaching the Cherokees "out of the white man's book" and by showing them how to use "good tools and [raise] better cotton" (104). During his discussion of the printing press, Sequoyah shares with Dan the Cherokee explanation of why white men have books while Cherokees have bows and arrows when he tells Dan that "The Creator of men had offered the book to the Indian, whom He created first, and the bow and the arrow to the white man. But the Indian was slow to take the book, so the white man stole it. The Indian must take the bow and arrow, and make his living by hunting" (106). Sequoyah immediately refutes any definitive significance to the story when he says "But, of course, that was only a story" (106). Sequoyah is based on a true historical figure who invented the Cherokee syllabary in the early 1800s.<sup>16</sup> Sequoyah's goal, of inventing a written form of communication for the Cherokees is interpreted in the novel as a "foolish idea" of a deranged man who does not accept the story of why Cherokees carry bows instead of books (105). But, Oskison's Sequoyah persists in his dream because he believes that the Cherokees need a contemporary language that allows them to survive in a world which is steadily becoming dominated by white culture without losing their own

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<sup>16</sup> Whether his alphabet is the first written form of communication is, of course, debatable.

signs and significations. Interestingly enough, his quest for the sacred symbols suggests the closeness of his syllabary to a much older form of writing. It is this quest and his syllabary which hold the tribe together. The sacred symbols, if found, will help to regain Cherokee national pride, while the syllabary is a new form of writing which allows the tribe to communicate to each other and to the rest of America. Such a language will allow for the continuation of Cherokee culture and will restore hope to the Cherokee people who have felt disconnected since the important symbols, which provide a sense of well-being, were stolen by the Delaware tribe.

Oskison's novel, then, disassembles the many popular misrepresentations of Native Americans. He seeks to complicate the notion that all Native Americans are heathens while all whites are civilized by portraying less than savory white characters and moral Native Americans. He discounts images of Native Americans cognitive lack through representations of the syllabary, a written language that existed much earlier than commonly thought. He undercuts images of a dying Native American culture with images of a people who are thriving despite setbacks.

## V. Conclusion: The Unification of His People

The world heard, perhaps for the first time, the native tongue of the Five Civilized Nations during the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics held this year in Salt Lake City. A remarkable experience that sent chills down my spine, for the ceremony integrated the Native American tradition into one that was initially Greek but which has now, of course, become worldwide. Oskison's writing serves the same purpose; while it appears that he may beg for the integration of Native American peoples into white culture-and, more importantly, for the integration of whites into Native American cultures, he was far from being an assimilationist because he valued the rich traditions of both the Native Americans and the Euramericans. He argues, however, that in order for each of these cultures to survive, they must be accepting of difference. The frontier, once made into a territory, inhibits that unique interaction between cultures that is vital for cultural survival. His writing places him in the middle ground between these cultures, both of which he values with equal fervor.

Though Oskison has, for the most part, been criticized as assimilationist, *The Singing Bird* demonstrates that the two cultures from which Oskison originates, the Cherokee and white cultures, can co-exist. Oskison accomplishes this unification by expanding on traditional conceptions of the frontier. His frontier is a space where cultural contestation is replaced by a mutually beneficial relationship founded on cultural awareness and understanding. His novel, which is one of the first ten Native American novels, undermines even at this early period the misrepresentations of the Cherokees and of other Native Americans and argues that they are not heathens who are unintelligent and uncivilized. In fact, Oskison's work draws attention to the behavior of the settlers in

the West through his depictions of the people at Montgomery Point and of the settlers who are constantly encroaching on Cherokee and Creek land. These white settlers are, in many ways, criticized because of their unruly behavior and greed for land. Perhaps it was Oskison's hope to educate his white readers that the West was "won" at a cost, for the Native American culture, which in many ways is more accepting of difference, appears to be more democratic in its political structure, and does not too hastily exile its members (as is the case with Dan). Yet Oskison's frontier seems located too far from the very culture that could benefit from its influence as the white missionaries learn to do. The white culture, he argues, will be consumed by greed until internal struggle results in their annihilation. Despite this warning, Oskison's novel seeks to demonstrate that peace between the two cultures is a possibility. Through his retelling of the tragic period of history when the Cherokees are forced to remove, Oskison reimagines the frontier as a place where cultures often collided and merged, but it was also a place of growth and hope, a very forward-looking perspective for a writer whose contemporaries hold white culture at a distance. Oskison's novel attempts to personalize the Cherokee history for his white audience, thereby opening up a doorway for understanding and hope for the readers of his own time.

There is still much work to do. Oskison's sense of "deep time," a phrase recently appropriated by Wai Chee Dimock to describe the deep sense of history and culture in literary works, still needs to be explored. Oskison alludes to at least two important texts, the Cherokee sacred symbol and the Wallum Olum, both of which could be interesting to review in a study which explores the novel's deep time. His account of the sacred symbols could also inform our understanding of Cherokee history. Oskison's novel,

which is named for a female, seems to lend itself to a feminist reading of the Beloved Woman, whose counter part is the Singing Bird, because this text seems to be concerned with the role of females in the frontier and in Indian Territory. Another interesting study could read this work in conjunction with other written Cherokee sources, such as the *Cherokee Phoenix* and *The Arrow*, for insight into a Native sense of history, both oral and written. Though I have attempted to be as thorough as possible in my reading of the text, there is still work to be done on how Oskison's view of consumer culture probably lead him to write a novel like *The Singing Bird*. His short stories and articles would prove invaluable to this study, since, in these works, he continually alludes to issues that deal with the Native Americans in industrial America. Perhaps as we come to understand this novel to a greater degree, our scholarship of Native American texts written at this time period will be enlightened by Oskison's representation of his people and their history.

Year	Number of Publications (not including novels)
1895	1
1897	3
1900	2
1901	2
1902	2
1903	4
1904	1
1905	1
1906	0
1907	3
1908	1
1909	2
1910	10
1911	2
1912	3
1913	9
1914	13
1915	5
1916	0
1917	4
1918	0
1919	1
1920	0
1921	1
1922	0
1923	1
1924	1
1925	1

Fig. 3: John Milton Oskison's Publication History

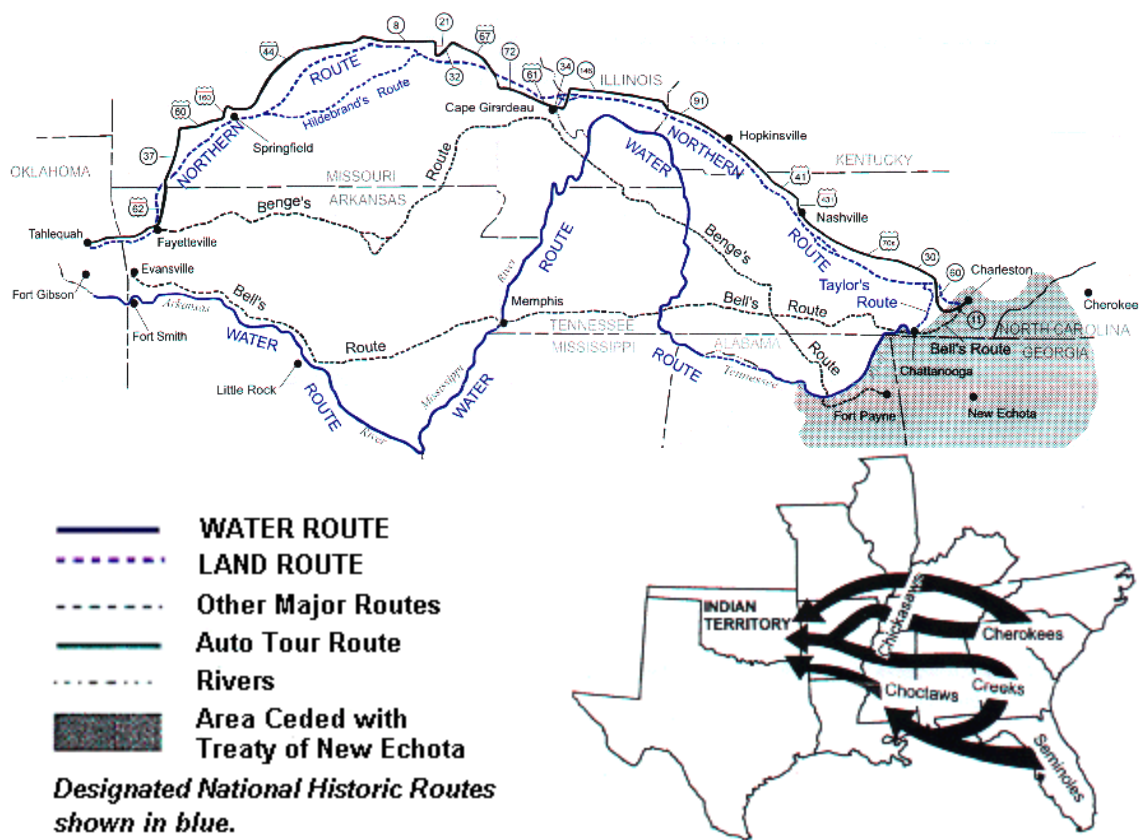


Fig. 4: "Trail of Tears" Map, source "Trail of Tears

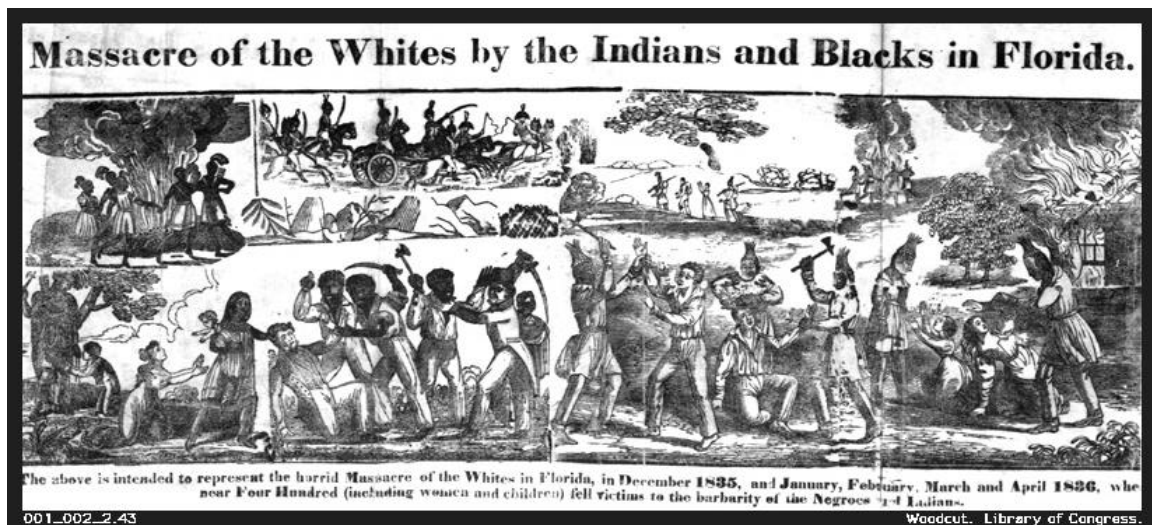


Fig. 5: "The Second Seminole War: Anti-Indian Sentiment"

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